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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000685

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, INR/AA, AND PRM/AFR
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [ER](#) [DJ](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: ICRC REPORTS 19 ERITREAN POWS IN
DJIBOUTIAN CUSTODY

REF: A. DJIBOUTI 632
[1](#)B. DJIBOUTI 508 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: SOLANGE GARVEY, CONSULAR OFFICER. REASON: 1.4 (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports having interviewed 19 Eritrean prisoners-of-war (POWs) and 40 defector/deserters in Djibouti, as a result of June 11 border hostilities between Djibouti and Eritrea. The future of these former Eritrean troops remains unclear: the ICRC states that its mandate does not allow it accept defector/deserters; UNHCR officials in Djibouti have not only been reluctant to accept defector/deserters (citing security concerns about placing them with existing refugees in Djibouti's sole refugee camp), but have also given contradictory statements about their involvement in this issue. The ICRC's assertion that the GODJ has reported 19 missing Djiboutian soldiers--including a senior colonel --raises speculation that the 19 Eritreans in Djibouti's custody will be held for a possible prisoner exchange. END SUMMARY.

ICRC EXCHANGE OF POWS THWARTED BY ERITREAN DENIAL OF CONFLICT

[1](#)2. (C) On August 21, Moustapha Mohamed Barkad, the sole ICRC officer in Djibouti, reported to Conoff that ICRC had visited and interviewed 19 POWs (from the June 10-11 conflict at the Djibouti-Eritrea border) and 40 Eritrean defectors/deserters in Djibouti, during an ICRC delegation visit from June 15 through August 20. The POWs reported to ICRC that Eritrean military servicemen will continue to defect to Djibouti, because they dislike serving in the Eritrean Army. One of the 19 POWs is reportedly a Somali transit migrant, whom the Eritreans captured near the Eritrean/Djiboutian border and forced to serve in the Eritrean military.

[1](#)3. (U) Barkad also reported that ICRC has been providing medical support at the border to Djibouti since June 12, as well as games to the POWs.

[1](#)4. (C) Barkad stated that ICRC's mandate would not allow the ICRC to accept the defectors/deserters from the GODJ. However, ICRC was working closely with the GODJ, and attempting to work with the GSE in Asmara to mediate an exchange of POWs. Barkad reported that his ICRC colleagues in Asmara had attempted to communicate with the GSE regarding the Djiboutian POWs on several occasions; however, the GSE continued to deny any conflict with Djibouti. Nevertheless, Barkad said he was confident that the GSE would eventually

communicate with the ICRC, citing past experience with the GSE mediating the release of POWs during the 1998-2001 Ethiopia/Eritrea border conflict. He observed that in 1998, the ICRC had succeeded in gaining access to the Ethiopian POWs held by Eritrea.

19 MISSING DJIBOUTIAN SOLDIERS, INCLUDING COLONEL

¶15. (C) Barkad said the GODJ had reported to the ICRC a total of 19 missing military servicemen, including a Djiboutian colonel, from the border conflict. However, he added, until the GSE acknowledged the conflict, and that the GSE had Djiboutian POWs in custody, the ICRC could not provide assistance to the families of the missing persons. As the wife of the missing Djiboutian colonel had created an association to assist the missing soldiers' families, ICRC sought to link the association with other international NGOs.

¶16. (C) At the GODJ's request, ICRC had asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to accept the defectors/deserters. Acting UNHCR Representative, Abdulahi Ould el Ba, reportedly informed the ICRC that the Eritrean deserter/defectors were not a priority. However, UNCHR Representative Ann Encontre, who returned to Djibouti August 23 after taking leave since July, subsequently refuted Ould el Ba's statement, saying this situation was her top priority. While reiterating security concerns about accepting the Eritrean deserters/defectors (ref A), she said she was willing to interview the deserters/defectors and

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planned to work with ICRC and the GODJ.

¶17. (C) NOTE. In a separate meeting with Conoff on August 20, acting UNHCR representative Ould el Ba reported that there were 36 Eritrean deserters/defectors in GODJ custody, housed at Megash Camp--a former UNHCR transit camp near Holhol (in Djibouti's southeastern Ali Sabieh Region). Ould el Ba said UNHCR had not/not yet accepted these 36 Eritrean deserter/defectors for resettlement, stating that UNHCR suspected that the GODJ may seek to add non-deserter/defectors to this group. END NOTE.

¶18. (C) The exact number of Djiboutian troops who were casualties or MIA, as a result of June 10-11 fighting, is unknown. Initial reports suggested 22 Djiboutian MIA, but authorities subsequently recovered the bodies of several Djiboutian troops. Embassy SAO reports that the Djiboutian military requested 30 body bags from the U.S. military, following the June skirmish, suggesting at least that number of KIA. State-run Djiboutian media have highlighted President Guelleh and GODJ officials building new homes for the families of Djiboutian troops killed June 10-11; state-run media said homes were being built for 44 families.

¶19. (U) BIO-DATA: Barkad is a native Djiboutian who has been the sole ICRC officer in Djibouti since 1993. Although he has an office in Djibouti, he spends most of his time at the ICRC regional office in Nairobi. ICRC plans to reassign Barkad in 2009, when he will be replaced as regional director by Christophe Luedi. Fred Green, a Swiss national, will replace current deputy director Ouivier Dubois on September ¶1. Barkad expects ICRC's new regional leadership to visit Djibouti in October.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Eritrean troops began voluntarily surrendering their arms and defecting or deserting to Djibouti in April 2008, prior to the outbreak of hostilities at Ras Doumeira on June 11. Since April, Post has raised its concerns with senior GODJ principals that the GODJ should seek to transfer Eritrean defector/deserters to international control (i.e., to either the ICRC or to UNHCR for resettlement), rather than have them remain in Djiboutian custody. Ambassador raised this issue specifically with

National Security Advisor Hassan Said Khairah. Indeed, the June 11 firefight was prompted by Eritrean troops firing on their own comrades deserting to Djibouti. Post believes that GODJ officials recognize that returning Eritrean deserter/defectors to Eritrea would imperil their personal safety. However, the ICRC's report that up to 19 Djiboutian troops are missing, raises speculation that the GODJ may seek to hold the 19 Eritrean POWs as a potential bargaining chip, in the event an exchange is sought. As the approximately 4,000-person Djiboutian army has a total of only 4 general officers, the missing Djiboutian colonel is likely a key military leader, as he would be one of the Djiboutian military's most senior officers. END COMMENT.

WONG